

The Return of Power-Sharing in Northern Ireland

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Power-sharing government has returned to Northern Ireland following extensive discussions and the recent publication of a document by the British and Irish governments. Optimistically titled [New Decade, New Approach](#), this was the mechanism found to nudge the political parties back into government together three years after the collapse of the Assembly. It is a lengthy text containing many proposals, plans and initiatives; the relative incoherence is evidence of the conflicting challenges faced. At the core of the dilemma is how to encourage the representatives of the two main communities in Northern Ireland (nationalist-unionist) to share power once again.

A system that could not cope

Things fell apart in January 2017 when the late Martin McGuinness (deputy First Minister) [resigned](#) from office in frustration at the actions and behaviour of his partners in government (the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)). The model of government depends on the willingness of nationalists (those who support Irish reunification) and unionists (those who support retaining the union with Britain) to share power, or at least the main political representatives of both traditions. It was plain by late 2016 and early 2017 that this was all coming under intense strain and it eventually collapsed.

The mood at that time reflected a worry that many of the promises of the peace process had not been delivered, and that too much was stalled within the complex power-sharing arrangements. On matters of human rights, equality, parity of esteem, mutual respect and the legacy of the conflict there was a view (particularly prevalent in the nationalist community) that things were not working as anticipated. The sense that there was also something troubling about the practical workings of government was vindicated during an inquiry into the operation of a [renewable heating scheme](#). Evidence suggested a fundamental breakdown in basic standards of good governance.

When combined with the pressures of Brexit, the reality was that the system could not cope. The fact that Northern Ireland is being removed from the EU without its consent (a majority [voted to remain](#)) exacerbated the challenges, not assisted by a 'confidence and supply arrangement' entered into between the Conservative Party and the DUP in order to keep the former in government at Westminster. That has now ended following the December 2019 General Election.

A document with ‘something for everyone’

So, what has this deal done to create the conditions for return? First, remember that this document was published by both governments, in advance of a deadline that would have required fresh elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly. In addition to the commitments provided by the governments it also contains their best guess on what a compromise arrangement would look like. There is an element of ‘something for everyone’, even if that ‘something’ falls far short of what was expected (for example, on Irish language legislation and human rights).

Part 1 contains the ‘Priorities for the Restored Executive’ and deals with matters that include health care, the transformation of public services and delivering a ‘fair and compassionate society’. Part 2 is billed as a ‘Northern Ireland Executive Formation Agreement’. Here the focus is on renewing government through an emphasis on transparency and accountability. Ministerial accountability and responsibility feature heavily. Reform of the Petition of Concern (a safeguard mechanism built into the Good Friday Agreement that was subject to extensive abuse by the DUP in particular) did not go as far as expected, but the proposals are intended to ensure that it is used less often and deployed as originally intended. Questions around the sustainability and accountability of the institutions featured during the negotiations, and there is a commitment now to a new Party Leaders’ Forum, an Executive Sub-Committee on Brexit and an independent Fiscal Council. There is much detail about the Programme for Government and the benefits of an outcomes-based approach anchored in notions of societal well-being. A reference to the legacy of the conflict is included, with the promise of legislation being taken forward at Westminster within a defined timeframe.

There is a section on ‘Rights, Language and Identity’, with an agreement to establish a new Office of Identity and Cultural Expression with the aim of, among other things, enhancing respect for diversity. On the central matter of contention around the Irish language there will be legislation that will create a new Irish Language Commissioner with a variety of functions. There will also be a Commissioner for the Ulster/Scots – Ulster/British tradition. The route to achieving this reform is through amendment of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the legislation that implemented aspects of the Good Friday Agreement). The stalled [Bill of Rights](#) process is given new life with a proposal for a Northern Ireland Assembly Ad Hoc Committee to be assisted by five experts jointly appointed by the First and deputy First Ministers.

The document ends with detailed commitments from the British government and the Irish government in order to underpin the various proposals, promises and plans. This outlines things that they will address, the sense that they intend to keep a closer watch on power-sharing this time around, and that support provided will come with conditions. There is reference to many existing and future initiatives, with the Irish government noting its support for a wide range of projects on the island of Ireland.

Not the end of disagreement and dispute

How should this all be viewed and how might it be understood? Although it follows extensive discussions and negotiations with the political parties, this document was produced by both governments. Essentially this involved the British and Irish governments confronting the political parties with a choice: return to power-sharing government or face an election. The carefully constructed and nurtured civic and media pressure is a case study in how governments can mould public narratives to suit their desired ends. Almost every problem in Northern Irish society was [misleadingly](#) blamed on the lack of a regional government. That will now create its own problems for the new government, with the level of public expectation heightened. In the end the British and Irish governments won. They got what they wanted, and now Northern Ireland has a functioning Assembly and Executive in place.

Disagreement and dispute will continue, with the British government in particular, but also between the parties themselves. Much remains to be delivered, and there is plenty of scope for old antagonisms to resurface rapidly. It is difficult to predict how constitutional and political relationships will evolve. Post-Brexit life will, for example, have a fundamental impact on what happens next. The fact that the UK is leaving without the consent of two constituent parts (Scotland and Northern Ireland) will not be forgotten by those who do not cherish the peculiarities of continuing membership of the 'union state' (UK). People in Northern Ireland are used to the idea that unionism is a partial political position, but it is not apparent that this awareness extends to Westminster and Whitehall, particularly in their dealings with Scotland. It may be that thoughts turn, on the island of Ireland, to reunification and finding a way back to the EU. That conversation has intensified since the Brexit vote and momentum will likely continue to build. The constitutional politics of Scotland and the island of Ireland may feature prominently in the decade ahead.

